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Testimony to the Labor Committee
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Raising the Minimum Wage, Hours for Building Cleaners and Fair Chance Employment

Senator Gomes, Representative Tercyak and members of the Labor Committee:

Thank you for coming to New Haven. It is very appropriate. Last month, a report by the Brookings Institute revealed that New Haven has the fastest growing income inequality of any city in the nation. It also showed that the income gap is greatest in the Greater Bridgeport area, with New Haven area nine of the top ten in the country. The report indicates that, like other cities across the country, falling wages at the bottom is the driving force.

In our City, we are well aware of this reality, which hits African American and Latino neighborhoods hardest. A movement is underway in our city demanding livable wage jobs for communities in need.

In preparing for this hearing, a friend who works in health care told me about her co-workers, mostly single mothers, who are paid minimum wage. They are working as many as three jobs and still have to rely on assistance to pay the rent and put food on the table. Her co-workers want desperately to get off assistance, but their wages are no where near enough to live on.

No one who is working full time should have to depend on social services or sometimes even homeless shelters to survive.

As coordinator of the New Haven Peoples Center I work with many young people who are holding minimum wage jobs and cannot afford an apartment of their own. They either couch surf staying with friends, or are forced to live with their parents or other family members in order to get by.

We were proud when Connecticut was the first to heed President Obama's call to raise the minimum wage to \$10 several years ago. Even at that time \$10 could not be considered a living wage. Today, it is certainly inadequate. The 'Living Wage Calculator' for New Haven shows that one adult and one child would require a minimum wage of \$26 to meet housing, food, child care and costs in our county.

Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour is necessary and sensible from every viewpoint. It will give workers more adequate compensation for their labor. It will remove costs from social services and therefore relieve the state budget. It will require employers to pay a living wage and contribute to our state economy instead of leeching our economy by forcing their workers onto public assistance.

Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour will be a big step toward reversing the fastest growing income inequality in the nation. It is a step that the state of Oregon just took and that many cities are taking to make the minimum wage a living wage. We cannot afford to delay. In fact, to reflect the urgency, we ask the committee to consider quickening the pace of the increase.

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The Peoples Center also urges support for minimum guaranteed hours for building service workers so they too can afford to live.

As well, we favor Fair Chance Employment. A young person who gets arrested for a minor crime, and we know this is unfairly and disproportionately African American and Latino youth, has no future in front of him or her. That young person is tagged forever with little chance of getting a job. How can anyone survive under these conditions? Requiring that employers revise their hiring practices is good for everyone. It is good for those who have done their time and want to start anew. It is good for our economy. We cannot afford to continue discriminatory policies that waste the talents and contributions of an entire generation.

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality.” The times require bold action to move us on this path.